

Chapter Five

Doesn't God Have a Purpose in My Sickness?

Looking at God's Sovereignty and His Control

Wrong belief: God controls all things, therefore the bad things, including sickness, that happen to us must have a beneficial purpose behind them.

Biblical truth: When we walk with God, he can bring good even out of the bad that happens to us.

A Gift from God?

When I asked Chuck whether he would like prayer for his sickness, he responded that he had tried this earlier. Before his cancer operation more than a decade earlier, friends from his church anointed him with oil and prayed for him. The cancer remained and Chuck underwent life-altering

surgery. Chuck told me that in the intervening years he had learned to see his suffering as a gift from God given to make him more like Jesus.

Was Chuck's cancer a gift from God given to develop his character or was it the result of sin and suffering entering the world as a result of the fall? Or worse, was this cancer an attack from the pit of hell, ultimately sent by Satan the destroyer?

A Cure for Stubbornness?

Kara had fibromyalgia and several other health issues. When I offered to pray for her, Kara refused. The conversation went as follows.

Kara: God allowed this sickness to teach me to depend on him.

Neil: Would you wish this sickness on your children?

Kara: No. I would not wish this kind of pain on anyone. But God knows I am very stubborn.

Neil: Are your children not stubborn?

Kara: Yes. They are.

Even though Kara said that her children were stubborn, she would not wish sickness on them to cure them of their stubbornness. How then could our loving heavenly Father visit us with sickness to cure us of our character faults? Despite my reasoning, I could not convince Kara to allow me to pray for her. Her theology created a barrier. If Kara followed her reasoning to its logical conclusion, she would never go to a doctor or take medicine for her health issues.¹ If God willed her to be sick to teach her some spiritual lesson, then she would be acting contrary to God's will if she took medication to relieve her suffering.

1. I am indebted to Smith Wigglesworth for this idea. See *Ever Increasing Faith*, 42–43.

A Challenge to Make Us Grow?

Daniel was no stranger to chronic pain. He had been struggling with back pain for years, and now, frozen shoulder. We were sitting in another friend's backyard, talking about healing. Daniel was willing for us to gather around and pray for him. His wife was the first one to pray and she prayed with passion. After her prayer, she wiped tears from her eyes. There was no change in Daniel's condition. I then prayed for Daniel a couple of times without seeing any change. The third time, I began with, "Lord we know that you do not want Daniel to be suffering in this way." Then I stopped and asked, "Daniel, do you believe this?"

"I know that God wants me to be well eventually, one day in heaven." But Daniel was not at all sure that God wanted him to be well now. He asked, "What if God wants me to learn something through this period of suffering?"

"Would you wish a disease on your son to teach him a lesson?"

"No."

"How can you think your heavenly Father would do the same for you?" We then talked about how challenge is necessary for growth in both academics and athletics. In athletics, for example, some tolerance of pain is required.

Daniel responded, "I firmly believe this to be true."

"But you don't hit your son with a hammer to teach him to tolerate pain."

Daniel ended with, "I'll have to think about that one."

The Source of Evil

No parent in her right mind would wish cancer, fibromyalgia, or any other sickness on her child, even if it was for a positive end such as increased maturity. No good parent would injure their child in order to provide a challenge leading to growth. To do so would be cruel. Parents who are cruel have their children removed from them by the state. If your children were rebellious, your heart would grieve, but you would not wish a terrible, wasting disease on them. Sickness came from the fall. It is not God's will for us.

Jesus tells us, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). If we see destruction in our lives, we can pinpoint the source: Satan, not God.

God Works All Things for Good

Chuck and Kara looked for some redeeming element in sickness. They assumed that the hand of God was behind their sickness, and therefore the appropriate response was to accept the sickness with equanimity. Where do we get the idea that God brings evil into our lives? It may come from an incorrect understanding of a very familiar passage of Scripture. Since “all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28 KJV), it is assumed by many that God brings all things into our lives. But does he?

Theologian David Guretzki explains:

Not everything has a purpose. That may be shocking to read from the pen of a theologian, but let me explain.

The text often cited for the idea everything has a purpose is Paul’s declaration, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28 KJV). I affirm the claim of this wholeheartedly. But does this verse really say everything has a purpose?

To affirm God works out everything according to His purposes is very different than saying everything—every event, every tragedy, every mystery, indeed every evil and sin committed in this world—has a God-ordained purpose.

As a perfectly good and holy God, He will not and cannot ordain evil things to happen. To do so would be a contradiction of His nature.²

In Luke 13:10–16 Jesus set a woman free who had been bound by Satan for eighteen years. God didn't bring that evil into her life, Satan did. Acts 10:38 tells us that Jesus “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” These verses show us that God is not the source of our sicknesses, the devil is. We are in a struggle against the forces of darkness. To attribute our sickness to the hand of God completely misrepresents our loving heavenly Father. God is not the source of the bad things that happen in our lives and we should not waste time seeking a beneficial purpose in them.³

Ignoring sickness for a moment, let's look at bad things in general, and whether or not God is behind them.

A Stolen Car and a Stubbed Toe

One Saturday I spent the day at church as part of a spiritual freedom weekend. When I came out of the building at the end of the day, I discovered that my borrowed car had been stolen from the church's parking lot. This event caused inconvenience and stress to me. Certainly, this event was an opportunity for me to grow and become more Christlike. It was an opportunity for me to trust God in the midst of uncertainty and lack. And yes, things worked out together for

2. Guretzki, “Not Everything Has a Purpose.”

3. John G. Lake, a man anointed with tremendous healing power, said, “Like a flash from the blue, these words pierced my heart: Oppressed of the devil! So, God was not the author of sickness! And the people whom Jesus healed had not been made sick by God!” Lake, *Adventures in God*, 79.

good for me—I was loaned a much nicer car. But God didn't cause the car to be stolen. A gang of thieves that frequented the nearby mall, motivated by the powers of darkness, stole it. Even though things turned out well for me, they did not turn out so well for the owner of the car—a fellow member of the same church. He eventually found his car, abandoned in a mall parking lot. But there were several hundred dollars' worth of damage done, not to speak of the hours of wasted time.

If I were to come out of the church and find the thieves in the process of breaking into the car, I would not sit idly watching them steal it so that I would have an opportunity to become more Christlike. Instead, I would burst out of the church shouting to scare the thieves away, or I would call the police and hope they arrive quickly enough to catch the hooligans in the act.

Similarly, walking barefoot in my house and stubbing my big toe on the table leg is not a pleasant experience. Clenching my teeth so that I don't say something inappropriate and not allowing my mind to go into a pain-induced spiral of negative thinking is a difficult step towards Christlikeness. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to say that God caused me to stub my toe. I will, in future, be careful to avoid repeating that mistake.

Even though I can grow as a result of negative events—and I will grow if I keep in step with Jesus—I must not credit God as the source of the negative events.

Is Suffering a Means to Our Redemption?

The unbiblical concept that we should passively accept suffering as redemptive has long been in the Christian tradition. During Martin Luther's day, the concept that suffering was redemptive had reached such an extreme that monks regularly whipped themselves.⁴ Historian William De Arteaga tells us:

4. Nathan Busenitz, "The Personal Reformation of Martin Luther." See also Wikipedia's "Self-flagellation."

The early monastic movement was also captivated by the Stoic concept that pain and illness were to be accepted bravely, and without striving for healing....An absolute connection was made between the sufferings brought on by illness and the believer's sharing of Christ's sufferings. This concept of illness as redemptive suffering subordinated the many Scripture passages which showed that illness was brought on by demonic oppression and an evil to be countered by the church's ministry (Luke 13:16, for example).⁵

God doesn't send suffering to redeem us. Jesus redeems us, not our suffering. We are transformed by Jesus as we walk with him through all the events of our lives, whether good or evil. As we walk with God, he can and often does bring good out of our bad. As Pastor Paul Manwaring says, "The mistake people make is that God is so good at turning bad stuff into something beautiful that people think he sent it."⁶ But this does not mean we should simply accept the bad things that happen.

Suffering can cause us to cast ourselves so completely upon God that we become more like Jesus. But that does not mean that God sends the negative events. Satan does not need God's help in that department. Nor does this mean we should welcome all suffering as God's instrument to make us more Christlike. Jesus came "to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8); we must not passively accept it.

5. De Arteaga, *Agnes Sanford and Her Companions*, 19.

6. As quoted in *Paid in Full*, directed by Art Thomas and James Loruss. Quote starts at 1:12:30.

Does Sin Prevent Healing?

In the next chapters we will look at several reasons why we often do not see the level of healing we desire. In this section, we will work through a touchy subject: does sin prevent healing?

What about the Curse of Sickness in the Old Testament?

Earlier, we looked at Kara. Could Kara's sickness be due to her sin? In Deuteronomy 28 the Israelites were told, "If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the Lord your God—the Lord will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses" (v. 58–59).

Might then our sickness be due to our sin? In response to this, we must note several things. First, the old covenant with its rules and regulations, including the blessings and curses set out in Deuteronomy, has been set aside and is therefore no longer in force (Hebrews 8:7–9a). Although it is possible to argue that the Mosaic covenant reflects God's character, and therefore principles of blessing and cursing found in Deuteronomy apply to us today,⁷ we must be cautious about making a direct connection between sickness and sin. Jesus did not make such a connection (John 9:3).

Second, even if the Deuteronomy passage linking sickness to sin still applies to us, we must note that the sin referred to in Deuteronomy is not simply making minor mistakes in fulfilling all the details of the Mosaic law. The sin referred to here is the sin of turning away from the living God and worshipping idols (Deuteronomy 28:14; 29:25–28). This is rebellion against the Lord of Hosts—a life direction away from God.

7. There is much debate in the Christian world regarding what to do with the Old Testament law. For a short summary of the many different options, see Wikipedia's "Christian Views on the Old Covenant."

Third, even if this part of the old covenant still applies, there is a simple cure: “return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 30:1–10; see also 2 Chronicles 7:13–14). God made it clear that under the old covenant, the cure for the Israelites’ problems was to turn back to the Lord and then he would restore their fortunes. Thus, if Kara’s sickness was due to some sin in her life, all she would need to do is repent of any specific sin that the Lord brought to mind and come back to the Lord.

In summary, a genuine Christian who has asked for forgiveness for known sin in their life and who, as best as they understand, is seeking to walk in obedience to the Lord, cannot claim that God will not heal them because their sickness has arisen because of their sin.

No Prerequisites for Healing (Usually)

Jesus healed crowds of people, many times simply by speaking a word (Matthew 8:3, 8, 13, 16). Surely, among the hundreds or thousands of people he healed, there must have been some who had serious sin issues. Yet Jesus did not require them to get spiritually cleaned up before they came for healing. At the pool of Bethesda, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years (John 5:2–9). There was no record that Jesus dealt with any sin issue prior to his healing. But when they met again later, Jesus said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (v. 14). Jesus’ words imply that the man did have a sin problem, yet Jesus didn’t make cleaning up his life a prerequisite for healing. Unless we have a very clear word from the Lord, we shouldn’t either.

Sickness Is an Impetus to Seek the Lord

The biblical record shows us that in some, but certainly not all cases, the sin and rebellion of certain individuals caused sickness to come into their lives, yet Jesus did not make repentance a prerequisite for healing. Where does that leave us? The following examples will show us the way forward.

Asa's Foot Disease

Asa, king of Judah, smashed the idols and sacred stones set up by his ancestors. When the Cushites marched against Judah, he relied on the Lord and experienced the Lord's deliverance (2 Chronicles 14:2–13). About two and a half decades later, Asa faced military opposition again. This time instead of relying on the Lord, he relied on money for his deliverance. When the prophet Hanani rebuked him, he got angry and put him in prison. Asa also began to oppress some of his people (2 Chronicles 16:1–10).

Three years later, Asa contracted a severe disease in his feet. Although the Bible does not link this disease to his sin, the Bible does tell us that Asa did not seek the Lord for healing, he only sought help from physicians (2 Chronicles 16:12). If Asa had sought the Lord, the Lord would have brought him face-to-face with his heart issues, his pride and oppression. We can view sickness as an impetus to seek the Lord on a deeper level.

Hezekiah's Illness

Many generations after Asa, King Hezekiah also became sick to the point of death. Unlike Asa, Hezekiah earnestly sought the Lord with tears. The result was that God healed him (2 Kings 20:1–7).⁸ Rather than seeing sickness as the necessary result of sin, or as an aspect of the inscrutable will of God, it is better to see sickness as an impetus to seek the Lord on a deeper level.

8. Some argue that it would have been better for Hezekiah not to have prayed for his own healing because in the latter part of his life he became proud and he fathered a son who was very evil. I disagree with this logic. Hezekiah's prayer was appropriate given the situation he faced. The fact that he later became proud is a separate issue and also a warning to us. If God blesses us, let us be careful to continue to follow the Lord in humility.

The Headache That Wouldn't Leave

My friend Jonathan and I had just spent ninety minutes ministering to Joanne, a woman who had been suffering from severe demonic attacks. Near the end of our ministry session, I asked Joanne how she was feeling. She said that she had a headache. Both Jonathan and I rebuked the headache, but it did not leave. Instead, it moved to pain behind the eyes.

The time I had allotted for this ministry session was running out and I was thinking that I was going to be late for my next appointment that evening. I wanted a quick solution. As I was asking the Lord what to do, I received a mental picture of James, Joanne's husband, with his hand on Joanne's head, praying for her. I was not sure what this vision meant but wondered if it meant that James would need to learn how to minister to his wife after we left.

I encouraged James to pray for Joanne, but he refused. After a bit of probing, he admitted that he didn't want to pray because, he said, "I am sinful." I told him to ask God to show him the sin, confess it, and then pray for her. Finally, James told us that he was unwilling to forgive his father for the severe beatings he had received in childhood. I explained that forgiveness is a choice—like choosing to cancel a debt. Eventually, he forgave his father. As soon as he did so, Joanne's headache left.⁹ The headache served as an impetus for us to seek the Lord on a deeper level.

Dealing with the First Item on God's Agenda

The following fictitious story illustrates an important principle of prayer ministry and rounds out the idea that sickness can serve as an impetus to seek the Lord on a deeper level.

9. It seems that the spirit causing the headache was in some way related to the fact that James would not forgive his father. My guess is that lack of forgiveness on James' part opened a door of access for an evil spirit to trouble his wife with a headache.

Frank's Migraines

Frank was struggling with migraines and desired relief from his malady, so he came to Johnson for prayer. Unknown to Johnson, Frank also had a secret addiction to pornography. Frank was ashamed of his sin and felt like garbage. All his attempts to get freedom through self-control had failed. He went to a pastor once, but the pastor only made him feel more guilty. Now Frank was too ashamed to mention his problem to anyone.

Johnson prayed with all his might for Frank's migraines, but nothing changed. With our knowledge of Frank's sin, it would be easy to make a straight cause-and-effect connection: Frank is living in sin; therefore God will not heal him. However, if we make such a connection, we turn Christianity into a clean-yourself-up-before-you-get-God's-blessings reward for good performance. This is not the way our relationship with God works. We come to him with all our sinfulness. God meets us where we are at. God's gracious gifts are not contingent on our spiritual performance.

So why wasn't Frank healed when Johnson prayed? Let's view the situation from God's perspective. God wants Frank to be healed of his migraines. God also wants Frank to be healed of his deeper and more serious pornography problem. Let's assume that God wants to deal with the heart issue before he addresses the physical pain. To encourage Johnson and Frank to probe a little deeper, God temporarily withholds his healing power. As both Johnson and Frank ask the Lord why healing has not occurred, God leads them to the first item on his agenda: facing the woundedness in Frank's heart that causes him to turn to pornography for solace. Being in tune with God's agenda in each encounter with a sick person will lead to greater effectiveness in healing.¹⁰

10. We need, however, to be cautious and kind. We cannot assume that heart issues are always the reason why a person is not healed.

Conclusion

Some people say that God gives sickness to teach us a lesson or to shape us into Christlike character, but this is not congruent with the loving heart of God. Certainly, we face difficulties in this life. May we learn and become more Christlike in every difficulty we face. But the fact that we can learn from our painful situations doesn't mean we should sit passively by when a difficulty comes. Like Jesus, we are called to destroy the works of the devil.

The Bible does record specific occasions where individual sickness was linked to individual sin, but individual sickness is not always caused by individual sin. If sickness is the result of sin, we can simply ask God to reveal the sin, and then turn to him in repentance. As we pray for people, we need to pay attention to what the first item on God's agenda is. Jesus healed many people without dealing with their sin problem first, but in other biblical accounts, we see that healing came after dealing with heart issues. We can view sickness as an impetus to seek God more deeply.

Key Bible Passages

“You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” (Acts 10:37–38)

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their

wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:13–14)

Teaser

In the next chapter we will examine the concept of human agency. We will find out why God’s will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven.

Closing Prayer

God, I thank you with all my heart that you are a good God. Thank you that you do not cripple or injure us to reform our character or make us grow spiritually. I thank you again that you desire our healing.